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ABSTRACT

The Potential Reentry Opportunities in Business and Education (PROBE) counseling and referral system is intended to help single parents and displaced homemakers gain greater control over their own lives, careers, and futures. PROBE began in 1975 as a campus-based program at Pennsylvania State University and became community based in 1977. PROBE, which is based on the premise of counseling for empowerment, involves three steps. The rapport that is initially established between a PROBE counselor and an individual client is transferred first to bonding within a peer group. This trust in a peer group is eventually transformed into a belief in one's own decision-making capabilities (thus reflecting a passage of trust from supportive counseling to peer group to self). PROBE is designed to provide clients with access to accurate and current information about themselves and their options; the support and skills necessary to make positive decisions, formulate plans, and implement them; and progress at their own individual rates of transition and development. PROBE offers eclectic and pragmatic client-centered counseling and has devised an intensive job preparation program (in the form of job readiness groups) that covers interpersonal, work-related, and job search skills. For the past 10 years, PROBE has had a success rate of more than 85 percent. Besides its direct services, PROBE also has an active research component. (MN)

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PROBE: EMPOWERING THE INDIVIDUAL

(A CASE STUDY)

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PROBE (Potential Reentry Opportunities in Business and Education) is a counseling and referral system dealing primarily with single parents and displaced homemakers. In 1975 PROBE began as a campus-based project for reentry women. Outside funding began in 1977 and offices became community based. For ten years staff have worked one-to-one and in group settings with approximately 300 women a year.

Through several iterations a firm design for the counseling process and for helping the client prepare for the labor market has evolved.

Counseling for Empowerment

Over 96% of the clients entering PROBE are women newly separated, divorced, widowed, and/or single parenting. They carry all the social and emotional luggage these events imply. These can include: severe economic constraints or sudden poverty, high anxiety, low self-esteem, and deep insecurity over their abilities and future. Some self images are not just fragile but decimated. Still, the nameless hidden core of strength that impels each woman through PROBE's doors is available to her as a cornerstone for new construction. She brings a wealth of life experiences as well.

The counseling goal is to enable each individual to excercise her strengths toward control over her life, career, and future. The process that has evolved is critically based on a three-stage development of trust. The rapport established initially with a counselor transfers to bonding within a peer group

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and finally to renewed, or even a totally new, belief in one's own decision making capabilities. It reflects a passage of trust from supportive counseling to peer group to self.

PROBE counselors represent a variety of training programs, counseling models, and experiences. However, they share a common commitment to non-directive, client-based counseling that promotes self-actualization. The theoretical base derives broadly from Rogers, Satir, and Erickson. Feminist theorists such as Gilligan, Miller and others serve as the base for the feminist steps in empowerment. Essentially, no decisions, directions, or hints are supplied to the client. Each woman is encouraged with new support systems along with the tools and information that are needed for self-realization.

Step one, the intake process, involves active listening, supportive counseling, and establishing trust. A shared assessment of the client's individual needs evolves. Usually, one or two additional individual sessions precede entering the peer group experience. During these sessions the client actively participates and the counselor responds. Many women arrive steeped in advice from family, friends, lawyers, and agencies; they may be unused to the sense of their own voice. Thus, this dialogue may initiate the first phase of client empowerment.

The extraordinary range of clients' needs predicates flexible counseling methods. Women regularly (10% to 30%) have experienced rape, domestic violence, or incest and some reveal the experience for the first time at PROBE. Critical needs are met by offering the client individual referrals to an appropriate community program or therapist. As the client implements the referral, she gains another sense of control. Therefore, counselors rely heavily on maintaining close community linkages. Many women need and benefit from several special programs simultaneously during the initial critical period.

Knowledge is a tool to empowerment. Most clients require access to some elementary information about themselves for effective decision making. Counseling, therefore, incorporates tests on personality, interests, skills, abilities, and reading levels to provide this information. Care is taken to show and evaluate every test and every score one-to-one with each client. The focus is on self-exploration and self-knowledge as leading to good decisions.

Standardized test instruments include the Wide Range Interest and Opinion Test (WRIOT), the Non-Sexist Vocational Card Sort, the Kiersey Temperment Sorter, General Aptitude Battery, and the Nelson-Denny Reading Test. The individual results discussed in confidence present another phase in gaining control over one's life. Women, evolving from primary nurturing roles with others, begin to apply time and energy on themselves.

In the peer group, women learn to trust each other through shared feelings, experiences and insights into their cultural values and their own current profound social changes. A formally signed contract of confidentiality helps to forge the bond. The group often explores education, training programs, and careers together making their own arrangements voluntarily. Role models from the community and earlier peer groups show transitions can be successful. Counselors serve as facilitators and gradually delimit their roles. Assertiveness training, through intermittent short excercises, is a primary tool for client empowerment.

In the group process, each woman discovers her unique strengths, values and transferrable skills. The transfer of trust to herself and subsequent independence varies with each person. It is usually accomplished in one to three months. Most women enter the program seeking ways to deal with change. Rarely, a woman will take a year to consolidate her goals. Through empowerment

counseling, a client attains:

a) access to accurate and current information about herself and her options;

b) the support and skills neccessary for positive decisions, plans, and implementation; using

c) her own rate of transition and development.

The counseling is eclectic and pragmatic, because it is client-centered. The counselor serves as a co-conspirator (co-worker) in the plan to achieve self-actualization. Throughout the process a feminist orientation of client as co-counselor is evident.

Job Readiness Groups

In order for women to be prepared for the labor market, they not only need to know their inner selves, their interests, and skills, but also the job availabilities in the community. To help accomplish this PROBE nas devised an intensive job preparation program covering inter-personal skills, work-related skills, and job search skills.

The inter-personal skills concentrated on include self-confidence building, increasing assertiveness, communication skills, time and family management, decision making and goal setting.

Much effort is devoted to building good self esteem. If women do not feel good about themselves, then they cannot project positive self-images to employers. Various exercises support self-confidence building. For example, they may write down positive statements to post on bathroom mirrors or over the kitchen sink. Daily, the group spends time writing or discussing such topics as "what I'm proudest of", "what I'd most like to receive compliments on," etc.

At first it is difficult to share, but gradually women become more comfortable talking positively about themselves.

Many clients need to learn that being assertive is not the same as being aggressive. Good communication skills are basic skills for a more satisfying personal and professional life. The difference between effective and ineffective communicative styles can be learned. Some members of the group may need to brush up on their techniques while others realize their style is hindering their relationships.

Stress is in all our lives and the women outline their good and bad stressors. They learn relaxation techniques to help reduce tensions. Time and family management is an area where women are eager to learn how to balance both. The first thing the group learns is that no one can "do it all" and each must learn ways to put in priority order what is truly important. Further, staff encourage the clients to get their families involved in tasks so that every member is part of the balancing act. Finally, decision making and goal setting are often difficult for women to discuss. Some think they've had a goal, others are afraid to set goals for fear of failure. However, by the time interacting is completed clients understand better why setting goals and making decisions are all part of taking control of their lives.

The work-related skills segment looks at attitudes towards work, allowing the women to get in touch with their inner feelings about work and developing an awareness of why they want to work. Is it to satisfy basic needs? added financial security? interacting with others? Is it to gain praise and recognition? to find fulfillment? They need to look at their own values, interests and skills. Through fantasizing exercises they picture themselves in

the ideal job, in the perfect work setting, dressed comfortably, using the skills and values that are right for them. By the time this process is over women are more sure of the kind of job they want to explore.

The third part of the program is building good job search skills that include search strategies, resume writing, interview preparation, mock interviews, visiting skill-training and employer sites, and locating community resources. Some of the strategies are: letting everyone know they are seeking employment, contacting companies of interest and conducting information interviews; researching places that use their work-skills; and reading news stories that may indicate job openings. Resume writing has women outlining on paper what skills they can bring to a job so that they can highlight what's important. To prepare for interviews staff go over basic questions employers ask and in the mock interviews, personnel directors then report how well prepared the women are. The on-site visits and locating community resources really stimulate the women for then they realize there is a place for them in the paid work force. By the time the group processes are completed, the women 1) better understand themselves, 2) know what skills they can bring to the labor market and 3) are better prepared to show potential employers how they can help the company succeed.

Success Stories

Susan is twenty-six years old, a single parent of a five year old son who has emotional problems. She came to PROBE with low expectations because of past failures and disenchantment with social and educational systems. Through PROBE's Job Readiness Class, Susan was able to gain the confidence and self-esteem to develop realistic goals and set about meeting them. PROBE was able to fund a computer programming course that she selected, and she now

approaches its conclusion as an A student. Her son is enrolled in special classes to meet his needs, and a previously undesirable living situation has been resolved with the assistance of one of PROBE's community resource people.

Walda came to PROBE after leaving a thirty-three year marriage which produced ten children and offered care to one hundred foster children. She had no idea of what she could do or what she wanted to do, but she knew she could do "something". Walda was extremely bright, articulate and self-aware. During one of PROBE's Job Readiness Class on-site visits to the area Vocational-Technical School, Walda walked into the drafting class, spent a few minutes exploring the room and exclaimed, "This is it!" With funding from JTPA monies, she attended the vo-tech class, finished the course in May and was hired by a local architectural firm. One example of Walda's ability and persistence came in December by which time the class (mostly teen-agers) should have completed ten drawings and Walda had completed her forty-forth!

Kathy came to PROBE while a resident at a home for single parents. She had a three month old baby and public assistance funds were her only income. Despite meager work experience and a number of problems in her late teen years, Kathy was determined to create a more secure future. She attended PROBE's evening group and enrolled in a local business school. PROBE paid for this schooling and for child care. Kathy successfully completed her course and is now employed by an urban human services organization.

Evaluation

How well is this working? Indicators of success are many over and above the individual success stories. Our placement rate is above 85% each year. Over 93% of group participants rate activities as "excellent."

Summary

For ten years PROBE has served women who are in the process of returning to school or to the paid work force. PROBE is based on feminist and community psychology principles. A primary element in its underlying philosophy is the empowerment of the people it serves.

PROBE has implemented a wide variety of projects in addition to its basic counseling and referral components. Some of these are job readiness workshops, advocacy sessions for employers, programs geared to helping women overcome fears about mathematics, readiness training for non-traditional employment, and a prevention oriented day camp for young women aimed at encouraging them to keep their future options open by studying math and science in high school.

These projects and others have served a wide range of participants, but one population has remained a primary focus for PROBE: displaced homemakers. PROBE's projects are all based on the concept that the goal is to enhance the opportunities for people to have control over their own lives.

In addition to direct service, PROBE has an active research component. New directions must be explored while always maintaining a strong feminist and community psychology philosophy. Ten years later this organization's overarching goal remains the further empowerment of clients, who are primarily women.